

# Facts of Lice

## Information Sheet

Perhaps you have received a letter from school, or a telephone call to notify you of a “lice alert”. You may feel angry, fearful, frustrated or itchy. Head lice are not a health issue in that they do not carry disease, but they can challenge your emotional health.

Don't panic! Be sensitive to your child's feelings and check your child's head right away. Checking for lice takes patience, diligence and plenty of time.

Four centuries, people have been dealing with head lice. A co-operative community effort will help to keep head lice in check. This means that all families must take responsibility for regular head checks and treating their children if head lice are found. There are differing opinions by researchers, pharmaceutical companies and parents who have experience with head lice. This fact sheet will provide an overview of a variety of treatments.

### **The Head Check**

- Sit in a well lit area – near a sunny window or brightly lit lamp.
- Divide the hair into sections and look carefully; one section at a time.
- Look carefully in the hair behind the ears, nape of neck and hairline, “the halo” of the head.
- Check the heads of all family members.
- Don't forget to have your own head checked.
- If you find head lice or nits (eggs), proceed with treatment.
- If you don't see lice or nits (eggs), continue to check the head regularly twice a week for one month or more often if there is an outbreak.
- If you see anyone scratching their head or if someone tells you that their head feels itchy, check their head.

### **What you might find on the head if you have lice:**

- Nits (eggs)
- Lice
- Bites on the scalp
- Excrement from lice (looks like pepper)
- Hair casts
- Residue from gel, mousse or hair spray
- Dandruff

### **Proceed with treatment only if you find nits (eggs) or lice.**

### **Who is at risk?**

Anyone can get head lice. School children get them more often because they're frequently in head to head contact.

### **If your child has lice:**

Tell anyone with whom our child has had contact to have their head checked; e.g. babysitter, grandparents, the school, playmates, parents, playground/sports group parents. This helps to prevent the spread and protect your child from another encounter with lice. Only humans get head lice, not animals. Head lice do not result from a lack of cleanliness.

### **Life Cycle of the Head Louse**

- Adult female glues the egg or nit to the hair with a cement bond, close to the scalp
- The nit sheds skin 3 times to reach adult stage in 10 to 14 days
- Adult life span on head is about 20 days

### **Nit (eggs)**

- Half the size of the bead on a pin
- Shaped like a tear drop
- Found close to the scalp, on the shaft of the hair
- Are cemented to the hair so they cannot be blown or flicked off
- Feel like tiny knots on the hair

### **Mature nits (eggs)**

- Larger, the size of the head on a pin
- More visible, creamy colour
- Eggs hatch in 7 to 10 days
- All nits must be removed

### **Lice – Immature louse**

- Transparent or rust coloured after blood meal and very difficult to see.
- Reaches maturity in about 10 days
- Lice have 6 legs with claws so they can cling to human hair

### **Mature louse**

- Female louse can lay up to 150 eggs during the life span
- Lice do not like movement or light
- Lice crawl from head to head
- They do **NOT** fly or jump

### **How Do You Treat Head Lice?**

When using anti-lice products READ directions and FOLLOW them CAREFULLY.

### **Treatments**

#### **Chemicals:**

- Pyrethrins (e.g. R&C) should not be used for anyone with a known allergy to ragweed or chrysanthemums.
- Permethrin (e.g NIX, Kwellada – P crème rinse) should not be used for persons with a known allergy to chrysanthemums, synthetic pyrethroids, or pyrethrins. Do not use on children under 2 unless directed by physician.
- AMC Acetomicellar Complex (SH 206)) is not recommended for children under 30 months of age.

**Alternative:**

An alternative treatment for head lice is the oil treatment.

- Apply mineral oil/olive oil liberally to the hair and scalp
- Put on a shower cap/bathing cap or wrap head with plastic wrap and leave on for a minimum of 2 hours
- If used correctly, oil will smother/kill head lice.
- After 2 hours, wash the hair with a small amount of dish detergent or a clarifying shampoo (no conditioner)
- **CAUTION:** do not leave child unattended with plastic wrap or shower cap on the head. **Do not wear for sleeping.**
- It is recommended that the oil treatment is repeated every 2 – 3 days for 2 weeks to ensure the success of the treatment.

**When using the head lice treatment:**

- Timing is important. If the product is rinsed off too soon, lice may not be killed. If you are using a chemical product, do not leave it on the head for longer than is recommended. This will avoid unnecessary exposure to the chemicals.
- Rinsing a child's hair under the tap (instead of a shower) will limit skin exposure and prevent the child from swallowing some of the product.
- These products should not be used near the eyes, nose or mouth. A towel held tightly over the eyes protects them during treatment.
- Wear plastic/rubber gloves to avoid unnecessary exposure to a chemical product.
- Store unused head lice products away from the reach of young children.

**Remove all Nits and Lice**

- Regardless of what treatment you use, check for nits and remove all that you find. After treating the hair, comb it to remove tangles. Part the hair into four or more sections. Use a clip to hold each section. Focus on one section at a time, checking small amounts of hair. Use your thumbnail against your first finger to strip the nits from the hair starting from the roots right down to the ends, then discard. Nit combs are sometimes helpful. If the nits are difficult to remove, dip the comb in vinegar. This may help the nits slide off more easily. Pin back that lock of hair and continue until all nits are removed.
- Freshly laid nits do not absorb chemicals in treatment shampoos/cream rinse – hence the reason why a second treatment is recommended.

**How do you Prevent Head Lice from Coming Back?**

- After treatment check for and remove all lice and nits. Nit removal is a painstaking, time consuming, and very frustrating task, but it must be done to prevent lice from coming back.
- Check for and remove all lice and nits morning and night for 7 – 10 days.
- Bright, natural light helps you to see the nits better.
- Lice are not likely to abandon the warmth of the scalp to lurk in clothing, furniture and bed linen where it is cold and there is no food supply.
- Most authorities do suggest washing bed linen in hot water and drying it in a hot dryer for at least 20 minutes. Lice do not like dry heat.
- Children should be discouraged from sharing personal items such as hair brushes, hats and combs.
- The use of mousse, gel or hair spray may discourage head lice.

**The single most important anti-lice measure is to check for lice and nits regularly.**